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ABSTRACT

During 2 summer months, about 200 children (8-13), attended the primitive camp which was administered through the Children's Fresh Air Society 45 miles from Baltimore, Maryland. Every 10 days, a new group of children (primarily black) arrived from Baltimore's geographic core. The 24 camp counselors, male and female, ages 18-23, came largely from white suburban communities; only 1 counselor was black. Preceding the arrival of each group, the counselors attended an orientation day, which dealt with the inner-city children and the camp experiences. Four seminars provided a format for professional stock-taking and decision-making regarding counselor-camp relationships and staff planning. At the seminars, the counselors were asked two key questions: (1) What have you learned about these youngsters as a result of this experience? (2) What have you learned about yourself as a result of this experience? Responses suggested that the primitive camp experience was a valuable one, particularly for those preparing to work with youngsters in a professional urban setting. It was recommended that camp counseling be encouraged, primitive and not so primitive, as a component of undergraduate, preprofessional curriculums leading to service professions working with children and youth. (NQ)

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PRIMITIVE CAMP COUNSELLING AS A COMPONENT OF UNIVERSITY TEACHING AND SOCIAL SERVICE PROGRAMS

by: Basil S. Deming*

[1974]

The twenty-four weary faces strung around the canteen wore varying mixtures of hope and disillusionment. During ten solid 24-hour days of primitive camping with close to 200 inner-city youngsters, these camp counsellors had struggled to organize, to accept, to give and to discipline as many had never done before in their lives.

The children, ages 8-13, came almost exclusively from the Black communities of Baltimore City's geographic core. The counsellors, male and female, ages 18-23, came largely from white suburban communities. Only one counsellor was black, and he was one of the very few whose facial composure suggested more hope than disillusionment. He alone had brought to this experience a background of first-hand knowledge and understanding of how many inner-city Black youth think and act.

The camp is approximately 45 miles north of Baltimore. It is administered through the Children's Fresh Air Society, its founding institution, and it's yearly operational budget is funded through United Funds. Its facilities are extremely limited -- a few small offices, a small canteen, a dining hall and a few semi-permanent buildings which house arts and crafts, small pets and camp supplies.

It is a primitive camp. The girls are housed in well-constructed cabins with bunk beds, but the boys sleep in six-man tents. Shower facilities are extremely limited, as are the plumbing facilities in general. It is perhaps the primitive conditions of the camp which accentuate rather than relieve the pressures which counsellors feel in working daily with the children.

The weary faces were collected this evening for the first of four seminars. These seminars followed an orientation day which preceded the arrival of campers. That orientation dealt with the inner-city children and about the camp experiences. The seminars were to provide a format for professional stock-taking and decision-making regarding counsellor-camper relationships and staff planning.

The theme this evening was that of grim reflection: "We hadn't anticipated they'd be so undisciplined, so physical, so unresponsive to rational explanations, so ... different." Ironically, the social environment shaped by the campers was more alien to the counsellors than the natural physical environment was to the urban-oriented youngsters. The counsellors were having to adjust, in many cases, far more than the campers.

The camp serves these children for approximately two months of the summer. Every ten days, a group of children would depart, the staff would rest, and a new wave of campers would crest the camp. Each succeeding seminar evening found different mixtures of anger, disillusion-

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ment, satisfaction and hope, depending upon the particular chemistry of the present group of campers, any recently generated administration-staff tensions, and even the weather over the previous several days.

Because the experience was one of total immersion, each counsellor had many strong thoughts and feelings to express. And because the counsellor had to invest so much of himself, willingly or otherwise, his thoughts and feelings tended to be as unique to himself as they were common to the group. Different counsellors invariably reacted with emphatic agreement or disagreement to the statements of their staff peers.

However, when pressed to react to questions geared by this investigator to determine the impact of the camp experience upon them, they did provide a sufficiently consistent pattern of responses to warrant some tentative conclusions. This investigator was particularly concerned whether any effects could be interpreted as indicators of positive personal and professional growth. Such evidence might justify the experience as a legitimate component of a preservice curriculum for students preparing for teaching, recreation, rehabilitation or social work. Several of the counsellors were in fact pursuing degree work in these fields.

Two key questions and their composite responses were the following:

Q: What have you learned about these youngsters as a result of this experience?

A: 1. They tend to be non-verbal in much of their communication, as compared with white middle-class children.

2. They tend to use emotion-laden words in their verbal conversation, including much profanity -- although profanity does not usually carry the heavy connotation of insult it usually carries in a middle class white's usage.

3. Many of them exhibit more hostility and aggression, both verbal and physical, than we're used to seeing in middle class settings. The hostility and aggression was addressed both to counsellors and other campers.

4. Several youngsters, particularly the 12 and 13 year old girls, refused to take part in several camp activities, prefering what appeared to be unorganized rapping in some cases and total disengagement from the group in other instances. Many campers continued to act this way even after engaging in activities they ultimately found themselves enjoying.

5. Weakness tended to be an invitation to aggression. When a counsellor failed to be consistent and firm in his behavior, his campers tested his authority. When

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a youngster allowed himself to be abused by another youngster without resisting, he became the target of repeated abuse.

6. Many youngsters respond strongly to touching. A few responded with fear or anger, but many responded with acceptance and pleasure. Much reciprocal touching was generated and it seemed generally to bring adult and youngster closer emotionally.

7. They tend to need well-planned and highly structured activities to function well as a group. Little planning and structure usually resulted in much non-productive or at least non-task behavior.

8. Many have personal hygiene habits which are surprising to the inexperienced adult. They tend to need instruction and supervision in personal body care, particularly in a primitive camp setting.

9. They tend to ignore directions or information when stated in a conversational tone. They tend to listen more to these communications when they are given in a loud voice or accompanied with threatening gestures or postures. However, their tendency to attend to this kind of communication lessens with the frequency of the messages.

10. Their tendency to listen and comply with directions covaries with the respect they hold for the speaker and/or the reinforcement they receive for listening and complying.

11. They read non-verbal communciations extremely well.

Q: What have you learned about yourself as a result of this experience?

A: 1. I have discovered the limits of my physical and psychological capabilities. I have had to pace myself as never before in terms of rest and relief from the constant interaction with the youngsters.

2. I can be very authoritarian when it appears to be the only feasible way of making things work.

3. I can actually enjoy watching youngsters who have given me trouble "knuckle under."

4. I don't really enjoy working with these youngsters. I just want to avoid them.

5. I enjoy them despite the hard work. I find rewarding the personal growth I see in some of my charges.

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6. I can become extremely irritable with anyone. I can lose my cool. I can get temporarily out of control, emotionally.

7. I can become very grateful for simple pleasures, e.g., a shower, a candy bar, a short nap, or solitude.

8. I can handle difficult situations.

9. I can enjoy touching children. It has made me more aware of that dimension of communication.

10. I know relatively little about children, particularly these children, and what motivated them. I need to know more.

11. I can care very much about some of these youngsters.

These responses have suggested to this investigator that the primitive camp experience is a valuable one, particularly for those preparing to work with youngsters in a professional urban setting. Primitive camping is not fun for a counsellor. It is hard work. But it appears to offer an opportunity which people frequently fail to get prior to entry into a child oriented profession -- an intense experience which teaches the participant much about the children he is preparing to serve professionally and much about himself, his personal strengths and limitations and his professional needs and aspirations.

This investigator recommends that camp counselling be encouraged, primitive and not so primitive, as a component of undergraduate, pre-professional curriculums leading to service professions among whose clientele are children and youth. It appears to be a worthwhile enterprise for the student, the camp and the youth who attend the camp. And it can be an efficient way of helping the student to earn a salary, earn credits and gain valuable experience at the same time.

One note of caution should be added. The counsellor should be reinforced frequently in his perception of the camp experience as a professional preparation experience. Such reinforcement seems to encourage him to perform as a professional, not simply as a young adult. With this orientation, he tends to continue accepting responsibility for the counsellor-camper relationship, even when the camper offers little to sustain that relationship. There are perhaps few attitudes or skills more important in teaching and social service professions than this willingness to continue nurturing the teacher-learner or counsellor-client relationship. Thus, the college or university-directed dimension of a camp counselling program should deal directly with the role of counsellor as a professionalizing role.